

**CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD
08 November 2007**

**EVERY CHILD MATTERS: STAY SAFE
AGENDA**

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CHILDREN FAMILIES AND LEARNING SERVICES**

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CHILDREN, FAMILIES & LEARNING**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to present the Corporate Parenting Board an update on the key issues affecting children looked after under the stay safe agenda.

BACKGROUND

2. On an annual basis Corporate Parenting Board receives information relating to the five Every Child Matters outcomes in relation to children looked after. Every Child Matters sets the Stay Safe Agenda as follows:

Children and Young People are:

- ◆ Safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation
- ◆ Safe from accidental injury and death
- ◆ Safe from bullying and discrimination
- ◆ Safe from crime and anti social behaviour in and out of school
- ◆ Have security, stability and are cared for

3. It is the duty of the Council as corporate parents to ensure that children looked after by Middlesbrough Council are safe, well cared for and protected.

4. Services for children in public care are highly regulated. Ofsted inspects services for children and young people and register and regulate all children's homes, foster care and adoption services. The Council's adoption service is inspected on a three yearly basis. At the last inspection in October 2006, this service was judged as good with the following comments made by the Inspectors in relation to the judgement on Stay Safe:

'Quality in this outcome area is good. Middlesbrough provides a child centred adoption service which means that its recruitment strategy for prospective adopters is informed by the needs of children who have adoption as their plan'

5. The Council's fostering service is inspected on an annual basis. The most recent inspections took place in October 07 and the report is awaited but verbal feedback suggests the authority has maintained its grading of good. If this judgement is maintained, the Council will move to a three yearly cycle of fostering inspections. In 2006, the fostering inspection found as follows in relation the Stay Safe outcome:

'Quality in this outcome area is good. Middlesbrough Council fostering service provides competent and well supported foster carers who keep children safe. The service is very thorough in its assessment of foster carers to make sure they are suitable to work with children and works very hard to make sure children are matched with carers who will be able to meet their needs properly. The fostering panel is effective and makes good quality decisions to promote and safeguard children's welfare. The organisation's recruitment procedure is generally robust. Some areas of training, administrative arrangements and systems for ensuring all checks are up to date need to be improved.'

Following each inspection, an action plan is developed, implemented and monitored to address any statutory and good practice recommendations arising from the inspection process. The report from the fostering inspection will be shared with Corporate Parenting Board once it becomes available.

6. Where Middlesbrough Council commission placements for children looked after, Ofsted Inspection reports are requested to ensure the safety of the provider and quality and standards of services provided. In the case of Five Rivers, who are commissioned to provide residential child care services to the Council, Regulation 33 reports on all the homes are received by the Head of Service and Service Manager on a monthly basis. These reports are also a standing agenda item on the Partnership Board meeting. The Regional Manager of Five Rivers also provides the Partnership Board with details of the outcome of Ofsted inspections of the homes.
7. Middlesbrough Council continue to contract with National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and Spurgeons Independent Visitors Scheme to provide additional services to children looked after. NYAS deliver advocacy and support available to all children looked after should they require this service. Social workers are proactive in encouraging children to access NYAS should they feel this service would assist the child or young person. In

addition, where a child makes a complaint or intends to do so, the Complaints Officer provides the child or young person with a leaflet from NYAS to enable him or her to access independent advocacy support in this process. This is in line with DCSF 'Get It Sorted Guidance'.

8. The Independent Visitors scheme is available to children who have very little or no contact with their birth family. This is a befriending service and provides children with a trusted adult with whom they can spend time and share any issues they may wish outside of the professional arena. The White Paper, Care Matters: Time for Change, outlines how independent visitors can potentially benefit a much wider range of children and young people, helping to support placement stability, and build constructive relationships and interests, encouraging children and young people's ambitions and aspirations. The White Paper outlines the Government intention to:
 - legislate to extend the opportunity to have an Independent Visitor to all children in care where they would benefit significantly from such a relationship and,
 - revitalise the Independent Visitor scheme by practically working with local authorities – in partnership with voluntary and private sector organisations - to increase the pool of volunteers who wish to become independent visitors.

9. The Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) Regulations 2004 require each responsible authority to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). This recently strengthened role of the IRO aims to improve safeguards for children by ensuring effective care planning and implementation and monitoring outcomes. IROs can also ensure the child's access to advocacy services and the complaints procedure. The White Paper considers at length the future role of the IRO and whether it would be appropriate to externalise this service. At this stage, the Government is not seeking to follow this more radical course of action, but seek, in the immediate future, to significantly strengthen the role of the IRO so that each IRO is expected to fulfil their role with credibility and independence. The White Paper outlines the following actions to strengthen this role:
 - Require each local authority to appoint a named IRO for each child;
 - Require IROs to spend time individually with each child prior to any review;
 - Strengthen existing guidance by defining a 'significant event' when a review must take place before any proposed change can occur;
 - Update guidance so that a referral by the IRO to CAFCASS is no longer seen as a last resort;
 - Amend guidance to specify optimum caseloads for IROs.

10. Placement stability and security continues to form a key part of the Performance Indicator framework. The table below sets out key indicators in relation to placement stability and our performance over the past 3 years.

INDICATOR	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
A1 The percentage of CLA with three or more placements during the year.	10.1%	10%	11%
D78 The percentage of children continuously looked after for 2.5 years who were living in the same placement for 2 years or placed for adoption.	55%	65%	74.4%
C23 The number of children adopted during the year as a percentage of the number of CLA who had been looked after for 6 months or more.	14.9%	11.1%	7%

Placement stability remains steady with a significant improvement in long term stability. With regard to children adopted during the year, this figure was low in 2006/07, however this, to some extent, relates to when children are placed for adoption. In 2006/07 18 children were placed for adoption, it is anticipated that they will be adopted in 07/08 and this indicator will improve significantly in this year as a result.

11. Placement stability remains a key focus of the work of the looked after service. Current developments underway include:
 - ◆ Review of foster care payments to ensure recruitment and retention of carers
 - ◆ Plans to develop a mechanism to support children on the edge of care and placements at risk of breaking down
 - ◆ Implementation of proposals in the White Paper around placement choice and commissioning arrangements

12. To ensure children looked after are safe and protected, South Tees Local Safeguarding Children's Board has recently launched the revised Child Protection Procedures. In addition to this, the Council has a number of policies, procedures and processes for children looked after to address risk factors associated with their own behaviour or that of others, these include:
 - ◆ Thresholds and procedures for child protection
 - ◆ Procedures for allegations against staff and carers
 - ◆ Whistleblowing policy
 - ◆ Guidance on managing bullying and discrimination in the Foster Carers Handbook
 - ◆ Health and safety regulations and assessments
 - ◆ Missing from Placement Procedures (to be revised in 07/08)
 - ◆ Information Sharing and Joint Working Protocol with the Youth Offending Service (revised May 07)
 - ◆ Bullying policies and procedures for residential care. (A bullying policy for children looked after is currently in development.)

13. Children are seen regularly by their social workers and the looked after service is currently in the process of undertaking an audit in relation to visiting frequency for children looked after. As part of this piece of work a survey is being carried out with children and young people in care, the results of which will inform future policy and service planning.

14. Sharing of information across organisations and professional boundaries is a key element of ensuring the safety of children and young people and is an identified priority of the Children and Young People's Plan and Stay Safe theme group of the Children's Trust. Within Family Services, the new Integrated Children's System (ICS) database is in the process of being implemented. This facilitates the collection and monitoring of case information underpinned by I.T. systems and is part of the 'e-social care' record for children and young people. The introduction of the ICS framework is part of a range of information sharing measures being implemented by central Government in order to reduce the risks surrounding the protection and safeguarding of children and young people. Within the looked after service area, records are currently being backloaded to ensure that this system is fully operational for records of looked after children.
15. The protection and safety of children looked after remains a high focus for the looked after service and the independent reviewing unit. These children remain our priority and developments within the services are implemented with their needs and best interests in mind.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial, legal or ward implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Corporate Parenting Board advise the Executive to:

- a) Note the information relating to keeping children looked after safe and
- b) Endorse the continued work of Middlesbrough Council with children looked after ensuring their safety and protection

REASONS

6. It is important that elected members are aware of and approve this aspect of Children, Families and Learning work in order that they can effectively fulfil their responsibilities as Corporate Parents to children looked after and those receiving Leaving Care Services.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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